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Points Made By AS Reich in Backgrounder on Events in Venezuela

-- April 15, 2002 (Attributed to Senior Administration Official)

--Our public posture toward the events of April 11 was correct based on the information we had: There had been signs of increasing discontent with Chavez across the board. Labor, business, etc. Resignations by senior members of Chavez's government; members of the military had taken the unusual step of publicly calling him undemocratic, urging his resignation. Discontent culminated in the PDVSA strike, which mushroomed into a general strike and the march on the presidential palace. Such large demonstrations were a message to Chavez. Some gunmen, apparently ordered by the government, fired on the demonstrators. The military decision not to fire on the crowds was commendable and deserved our praise.

--Lots of conflicting information from that point on: Chavez had been taken away, an interim government formed. Decrees by interim government, which in the opinion of some were not legal, led to a loss of confidence in the new leaders and loss of support within the coalition and subsequently Chavez's return.

--The U.S. had been saying for months that it would not support unconstitutional change in Venezuela. We were one of the principal architects of the Democratic Charter, which had also been signed by Venezuela. We made our position clear both from Washington and in Caracas. While we had been sounded out regarding our views on one or another constitutional alternatives for removing Chavez, our message was clear: We would not presume to tell Venezuelans how to use their constitution, whether or not to remove a president -- just as we wouldn't want someone to come here and tell us to remove our president. We did not even wink at anyone (at the notion of an extra-legal move against Chavez). We have had our differences with Chavez but support the Democratic Charter.

--Not a legal experts, so won't be drawn out on whether or not the events of April 11 amounted to a coup. It was pointed out that the OAS resolution did not characterize the situation that way. The U.S. remains in sync with the other members of the organization. While the drafting process reflected many differing opinions regarding the situation in Venezuela, the resolution that emerged reflected consensus among members.

--Chavez is as legitimate today as he was a week ago. He is the elected leader of Venezuela. I was there watching the vote in December 1998. Legitimacy is conferred, however, not just by votes, but by the respect a leader accords society and the institutions of democracy. In addition holding accountable those who would overturn the democratic order, the OAS Democracy Charter applies to governments and imposes obligations on those in power. The current OAS mission to Caracas can achieve a great deal. The mission is in a position to determine what happened in Venezuela in the past week, the role played by various institutions, the military, media, etc. The visit to Caracas by OAS SecGen will probably not be his last, given the number of individuals and institutions that want to meet with the OAS team.

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--It is clear that Venezuela's political landscape changed in past week. Chavez didn't realize the extent to which he had become isolated. He needs to reflect on what drove him to order his armed forces to fire on his own people.

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